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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000380

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAILAND: VIEWS FROM THE RED HEARTLAND - STILL
LOVE THAKSIN, BUT NOT ENDORSING RED-SHIRT VIOLENCE

REF: BANGKOK 340 (CRACKS IN RED CAMP)

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Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A recent swing through central Isaan, the northeast heartland of pro-Thaksin and red-shirt sentiment, revealed an interesting set of views on the key political, economic, and social issues facing Thailand, both in the short-term, with large-scale red-shirt protests expected in Bangkok, and in the long-term, addressing rural development needs. A diverse array of contacts in Khon Kaen, Kalasin, and Udon Thani provinces agreed that their provinces still loved fugitive former PM Thaksin Shinawatra and would vote across the board for his affiliated Puea Thai party if elections were held in 2010. However, by and large Isaaners were turned off by the red-shirt violence last April and did not support street protests as enthusiastically as before. Furthermore, coalition party Phumjai Thai was making inroads into the Isaan political base by taking a page from Thaksin's political playbook: combining populist policies and budgetary disbursements with a political machine based on the network of local officials answering to the Ministry of Interior. No one doubted that Thailand's rural denizens had "awoken" politically the past decade and expected politicians to respond to their needs. But the issues repeatedly cited as mattering most to the people of Isaan were not political, rather: crop prices; water (access for irrigation, quality for drinking); local transport links; jobs; and what to do with bored youth addicted to methamphetamines and on-line gaming.

¶2. (C) Comment: The lack of wide-spread support for violent protests suggests that there is no genuine grass-roots impulse for a red-shirt action aimed at bringing down the government at this time. Instead the timing and nature of the upcoming protest is being dictated by Thaksin, with an eye on the expected February 26 Supreme Court decision on his frozen assets. Disarray in the top echelons of the pro-Thaksin camp in recent days (reftel) may now delay the promised big protest until early March. End Summary and Comment

Still Thaksin country, but only partially transformed

¶3. (SBU) A traverse of Khon Kaen, Kalasin, and Udorn provinces January 20-22 took the temperature of the heart of the still overwhelmingly pro-Thaksin northeast (Isaan). Interlocutors ranging from opposition Puea Thai MPs, a red-shirt leader, and local officials to election commissioners, journalists, and civil society activists all agreed that Thaksin remained immensely popular personally. They attributed his enduring success to having transformed the previously pluralistic political landscape of the northeast a decade ago, relying on a mix of populist policies and a political machine built on the local networks of pre-existing provincial barons. The key policy planks were the Village Fund, 30 baht health care, small and medium enterprise development, and limited farmer debt forgiveness -- and Thaksin delivered on all once in office. In the process of winning Isaan hearts and minds, Thaksin made his personal and party brand much more dominant than any pre-existing political baron or network.

¶4. (SBU) While Thaksin's policies transformed the region politically, they did not solve the underlying problems of rural community development, numerous development activists and local elected leaders went on to emphasize. The village fund, intended as a micro-financing scheme, helped monetize village economies but in many places fueled new consumption rather than productive capacity; as a result of this and other unrelated factors, current rural household debt (130-140,000 baht) was nearly double the debt load when Thaksin took office in 2001 (70,000 baht). Thaksin's 2003 War on Drugs was highly popular at the time, but local leaders in all three provinces listed drug addiction to methamphetamine by bored youth as one of their top five challenges. Thaksin benefited politically from high world crop prices while in office, but he did not diversify the

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region's economic base, and most adults in their most productive years still seek work elsewhere, particularly in the cities, as they have for decades.

Loyal but not forever? The Phumjai Thai challenge

¶5. (SBU) Udorn red-shirt firebrand leader Kwanchai and Puea Thai MPs naturally focused on a political agenda of bringing Thaksin back, bringing down the Abhisit government, and forcing new elections. Apart from acknowledging that local residents had awakened politically, however, everyone else we talked to said that what really mattered to the people of largely agriculture-based Khon Kaen, Kalasin, and Udorn were economic and social quality of life issues: crop prices for rice, sugar cane and tapioca, the dominant three cultivated crops; water, both access for irrigation and quality for drinking, since overuse of chemicals in growing sugar cane in particular had fouled water sources; local transport links and improved roads connecting rural communities to major arteries; job opportunities locally as an alternative to migration to urban centers; and activities to engage bored youth prone to addiction to methamphetamines and on-line video games. Development activists such as former Magsaysay winner Dr. Krasae emphasized education, health, and environment issues as the systemic challenges Thai governments needed to address.

¶6. (SBU) Many of our interlocutors suggested that any government which delivered on these needs could win the loyalty of Isaan voters away from Thaksin and Puea Thai, which for now retain it. Nearly everyone said that coalition partner Phumjai Thai (PJT) was making a serious effort at replicating Thaksin's successful plan of mixing populist policies and strong networks of local officials, taking advantage of PJT control of the key Ministries of Interior and Transport to direct budgetary programming and control the loyalties of provincial officials. Even three PT MPs in Kalasin gave PJT and its godfather Newin Chidchob, who defected from Thaksin's camp in December 2008, their due,

agreeing with the assessments of others that, while Puea Thai would likely sweep any 2010 election, PJT would have a real chance to pick up seats throughout central Isaan were the next election to happen in 2011.

"Not ready to die" - limited support for violence

¶7. (SBU) The one major difference between the three provinces came in the depth of support for the red-shirt movement (formally: the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, or UDD), which nearly all distinguished from near universal personal affection for Thaksin and wide-spread support at election time for the pro-Thaksin political party (currently Puea Thai). Udon is clearly the center of active red-shirt sentiment; contacts in Khon Kaen and Kalasin repeatedly contrasted attitudes in their provinces with Udon. However, many of them assessed that support for the red-shirt movement dropped noticeably in the wake of the red riots in Pattaya and Bangkok last April, and several stated bluntly: "people here are not ready to die for anyone."

¶8. (SBU) The universally-cited reason for the difference in levels of red-shirt activism/support was the charismatic leader of the "Khon Rak Udon" (People Love Udon) movement, community radio personality Kwanchai Phraipana. Kwanchai's radio station hummed with the energy and bustle of a campaign headquarters in full motion when we visited January 22. By outside accounts, Kwanchai has expanded his network over four provinces, well outside of Udon (Nong Khai, Sakon Nakhon, Nong Bua Lamphu). He claimed to us that "Khon Rak Udon" has 300,000 members and can deliver 100,000 protesters to Bangkok (Note: we believe most red-shirt claims are overstated at least 3-5 times. End note). In contrast, the local elected leader of a community 30 km south of Udon city said there was very little red-shirt activism in his district due to the lack of an effective local UDD organizer, the same assessment we heard in Khon Kaen and Kalasin. One independent Kalasin political observer assessed that there were no more than

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600-700 red-shirts province-wide ready to travel to join to Bangkok for any political rally.

The Udon red-shirt game plan: options A, B, and C

¶9. (SBU) Kwanchai and the Puea Thai MPs claimed they would help muster 500,000-million red-shirt protesters on the streets of Bangkok in the run-up to the February 26 Court decision on Thaksin's frozen assets; the plan was to deploy 20 teams of 20,000 protesters at key intersections around the city, bringing Bangkok to a stand-still. If authorities were to over-react with force, Kwanchai and the MPs vowed the red-shirts would be ready to "respond in kind," in contrast to last April.

¶10. (SBU) Subsequent comments revealed indirect red camp acknowledgment that their latest self-styled "final battle" was not likely to achieve its stated goals. When asked when Puea Thai would table its no-confidence motion, one Udon MP replied: "we're letting the street action go first, which means parliamentary action in March." For his part, Kwanchai vowed that if the February protests did not "bring back Thaksin peacefully," Thaksin would force a return to Thailand by the April Thai New Year -- through Udon, naturally -- before assuming his place as the "Commander" of a citizen red-shirt army to march on Bangkok (note: there was a strongly negative public reaction in early February when the red army trial balloon was subsequently floated publicly; see reftel).

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